



Notes from Underground

Fyodor Dostoevsky

Study Guide



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Summary

Part I, Chapter I

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Summary

The narrator—referred to in this SparkNote as the Underground Man—introduces himself. He describes himself as sick, wicked, and unattractive, and notes that he has a problem with his liver. He refuses to treat this ailment out of spite, although he understands that keeping his problems from doctors does the doctors themselves no harm.

The Underground Man explains that, during his many years in civil service, he was wicked, but that he considers this wickedness a kind of compensation for the fact that he never accepted bribes. He almost immediately revises this claim, however, admitting that he never achieved genuine wickedness toward his customers, but only managed to be rude and intimidating as a kind of game.

We learn that the Underground Man has retired early from his civil service job after inheriting a modest sum of money. He only held onto his low-ranking job so that he would be able to afford food, not because he got any satisfaction from it. He notes that he is filled with conflicting impulses: wickedness, sentimentality, self-loathing, contempt for others. His intense consciousness of these opposing elements has paralyzed him. He has settled into his miserable corner of the world, incapable of wickedness and incapable of action, loathing himself even as he congratulates himself on his own intelligence and sensitivity. He adds that the weather in St. Petersburg is probably bad for his health, but that he will stay there anyway, out of spite.

In a note to Chapter I included in some editions as an introduction to the novel, Dostoevsky explains his intention in writing *Notes from Underground*. He tells us that the author of the work is fictional, but notes that the nature of society makes it inevitable that people like this fictional narrator exist. As to the structure of the novel, Dostoevsky explains that in the first "fragment," entitled "Underground," the Underground Man introduces himself and explains "why he appeared and had to appear among us." The second half, entitled "Apropos of the Wet Snow," consists of the Underground Man's accounts of actual events in his life.

Analysis

The first chapter of *Notes from Underground* gives us a precise sketch of the Underground Man's character. By the end of the first paragraph, we get a sense of the issues that preoccupy the Underground Man. Contradictions and indecision are fundamental to his character. He says that his liver hurts, but then immediately tells us that he is not sure it is his liver. He knows he is sick, but he refuses to see a doctor out of spite, even though he knows that in pursuing this spiteful behavior he is only hurting himself. He develops this idea of indecisive action later in the chapter, when he talks about the conflicts swarming inside him.

This inability to act stems from several important factors. First, the Underground Man is a nihilist, which means that he believes that traditional social values have no foundation in nature, and that human existence is essentially useless. The Underground Man despises the society in which he lives. Not only is the weather bad in St. Petersburg, but the culture of the city is built on bureaucracy and hypocrisy. Accepting bribes is common and widely tolerated. The Underground Man is filled with bitterness toward all aspects of society, but he is aware that he is powerless to

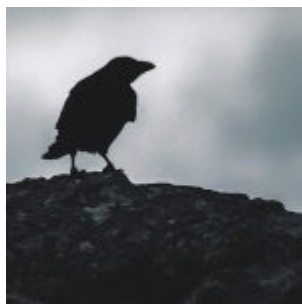
act against it or within it. He cannot even manage to be a wicked civil servant. Instead, he takes his aggressions out on himself, refusing to see a doctor and remaining in an unhealthy climate out of spite. This behavior is the first evidence we have of the Underground Man's masochism, his enjoyment of his own pain and humiliation. The Underground Man explores this idea in more depth later in the novel.

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Character List

CHARACTERS



The Underground Man: Character Analysis

CHARACTERS



Important Quotations Explained

QUOTES



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